Aeschylus in Action: Translating the University Stage

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With over 338 published English language rewrites of Aeschylus' plays (1900-2010), and over 300 theatre productions within the U.S., there is no extensive classification and analysis of these works. And yet, the tragedies of Aeschylus (or plays based upon these tragedies) are being produced and translated in the U.S. at a greater rate, and a wider variety of styles, than ever before. Michael Walton's *Found in Translation* includes an excellent list of translated texts, but does not include adaptations or "distant relatives" (which compose over half of the produced texts in the United States), and Oxford University's *Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama*, while an excellent reference for Commercial productions, and specifically those in the U.K., is incomplete in its documentation of the U.S. university stage. With the production of Aeschylus' tragedies in the U.S. steadily rising since 1900 (very few productions existent before this time in English), but only a limited number of translations and adaptations being used for these productions, it is increasingly important to examine the relationship between ancient text, translation, adaptation, and production.[1] For these works are, in many respects, significantly separated from each other in interpretation and purpose, some wishing to serve the original and others wishing to use it.

This paper will compare and analyse several key translations and adaptations of Aeschylus' tragedies in order to demonstrate the "creativity" present in the rewrites of Aeschylus and the role such textual interpretations play in the production of Greek tragedies. This will be achieved through an analysis of the script/translator choices and the performance trends of Aeschylus' plays at the university level. U.S. university theatres, often the most prolific and influential producers of Greek tragedies within the U.S., offer an excellent source for gauging the

U.S. relationship/interpretation of these ancient plays because they (1) continually produce these plays, (2) maintain detailed production records, and (3) combine academic, artistic, and commercial interpretations of the text.

Do the production interpretations of Greek *translations* significantly differ from those of *adaptations* and how do these textual interpretations relate to their performance interpretations? Karelisa Hartigan's seminal book, *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage,* states that the "scripts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have remained relatively unchanged…there have been, naturally, updated versions… Nevertheless, the old legend shows through" (Hartigan 3). Contrasting translation to adaptation, Hartigan asserts that it isn't the texts that have radically altered, but the production interpretations. However, this paper will argue that there is a significant difference between translations and adaptations and that this difference directly effects the production of these plays, as seen at the university level.

By far the greatest producer of Greek plays in America is the university theatre system (this does not include professional theatres in association with a university system, but only those run by academic programs). Of the 163 recorded productions at the university level of Aeschylus' plays, forty-six are unclassified, containing no record of the translator exists. This is approximately twenty-nine percent of all recorded productions. However, this is not an issue of lost or decayed records but neglecting to include the translator's name in the performance's billing and subsequent newspaper reviews. In nearly every case, authorship is given to Aeschylus, and Aeschylus alone with no account for the translation process. And, this is not incorrect, were the production, as ten percent of all university productions are, in Ancient Greek. But, they are not; these texts are all translated or adapted into English. In many of the newspaper reviews of such productions, short histories of Aeschylus' life and the Greek theatre are

included. If, as Karlisa Hartigan has suggested, there is little change in the texts themselves (except those due to the natural changes in language), there would be little harm in such practices. However, an examination of all of the translations and adaptations of Aeschylus' plays from 1900-2010 demonstrates that there are frequently great differences between these works. These newspaper reviews and production programs demonstrate the prevalent idea that there is little difference between English translations and adaptations of the Greek plays. There is evidence in these records of the prevalent idea that translations are all the same, with minor differences separating their theoretical framework. This is what translations scholar Andre Lefevere, in his essay "Changing the Code: Soyinka's Ironic Aetiology," attempted to refute, the idea that "translations are somehow 'not creative writing' and that they are hardly worthy of critical study" (Lefevere 145).

Of the remaining productions (minus the unclassified and Ancient Greek works) roughly fifty percent used adaptations and distant relatives (texts considered removed from Aeschylus' original to such a degree that they are new works based on the original) and fifty percent used translations.[2] In many examples, the translations used were either created for performance (often abridging the original tragedy and altering the style of the language for "performability") or adapted by the directors (most common practices are trimming of choral sections and rearranging speeches).

Only thirteen translations and adaptations have had at least two university productions (a similar trend exists for the Commercial stage). The following texts are those published works with more then one production at the University level, in order of popularity (nearly all of these works are from the *Oresteia*, the most translated, adapted, and produced of Aeschylus' plays*)*: John Lewin's *The House of Atreus* (1966), Robert Fagles' *The Oresteia* (1975), Edith Hamilton's

Agamemnon (1937), John Barton & Kenneth Cavander's *The Greeks* (1981), Richmond Lattimore's *The Oresteia* (1953), Ted Hughes' *The Oresteia* (1999), William Alfred's *Agamemnon* (1954), Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), Tony Harrison's *The Oresteia* (1981), Charles Mee's *Big Love* (1994), Tadashi Suzuki *Clytemnestra* (1986), Robinson Jeffers' *Tower Beyond Tragedy* (1924), Gilbert Murray *Oresteia* (1920). Many of these translations were/are produced many years after their original publication.[3] This is different from the translations used for non-academic theatres, where most productions occur within twenty years of their publication. Though the non-academic theatre is, as Michael Walton states in his essay "Translation or Transubstantiation," "thirstier for originality than for the original," the university stage continues to explore and work with older translations (Walton, "Translation or Transubstantiation" 191). John Lewin's *The House of Atreus* is still produced, forty years after its publication. So, where Walton states that ""A shelf-life of twenty years may be a bonus for the stage translator," this is primarily true of the non-academic stage (Walton, "Translation or Transubstantiation" 191).

An examination of the thirteen texts with more then one production will demonstrate the variance in translation practices for the twenty and twenty-first centuries. Differences that are directly related to the production trends of their period. Six of these texts are translations (Fagles, Hamilton, Lattimore, Hughes, Harrison, and Murray) and seven are adaptations and distant relatives (Lewin, Barton & Cavader, Suzuki, Jeffers, Alfred, O'Neill, and Mee). A comparison of the translations to adaptations, as well as the trends in translation (a practice that involves both "strict" translating and more "lenient" adapting) reflected in these works, demonstrates the variable nature of interpreting Aeschylus' tragedies and refute Hartigan's statement that the works of Aeschylus "have remained relatively unchanged" (Hartigan 3).

Prior to the 1940s, nearly every translation of Aeschylus' tragedies utilised an "antiquating," almost Shakespearean, language (intended to hark back to the Hebrew prophets, as translated by the English bible, and the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets). Nowhere is this style better demonstrated then in Gilbert Murray's *Agamemnon,* Strophe 5,

> To the yoke of Must-Be he bowed him slowly,
>
> And a strange wind within his bosom tossed,
>
> A wind of dark thought, unclean, unholy;
>
> And he rose up, daring to the uttermost (Murray, *Agamemnon*).

With rhyming couplets and a sprinkling of "thee" and "thou," this text, and others similar in style, have rarely been produced beyond the 1940s. In many instances, they are considered primarily works of poetry rather then dramatic texts. The Irish Louis MacNeice and American Edith Hamilton's *Agamemnon*s (1936/1937) mark an end to the dominance of this older (and what, by this time, could be termed "academic") style. Both of these works, though maintaining the strong poetic tradition found in most of the rewrites of Aeschylus, translate the text into modern English. This is demonstrated by a comparison of the above Murray passage with that of Hamilton.

> But when he bowed beneath the yoke of fortune,
>
> shifting his sails to meet a wind of evil,
>
> unholy, impious, bringing him to dare to think
>
> what should not be thought of— (Hamilton, *Agamemnon*).

MacNeice and Hamilton are the first translators of the twentieth century to use a modern, though not quite a conversational, English while maintaining the poetic integrity of Aeschylus' original.

Tony Harrison's *Agamemnon* (1981) takes a completely different approach, and atmosphere, to the play. Though, like Murray and Hamilton (as well as Lattimore, Fagles, and Hughes), Harrison maintains the original plot structure of the tragedy. Similarly to Murray, Harrison incorporates rhyming couplets, though he does not use them consistently. However, the effect, and intention, is quite different. Unlike Hamilton's graceful, yet discrete poetic style, Harrison creates a strong verse ripe with masculine barbarism (a characteristic that has dictated the production interpretations of the plays). The same passage as above, but by Harrision,

> Necessity he kneels to it neck into the yokestrap
> the General harnessed to what he can't change
> and once into harness his whole life-lot lurches
> towards the unspeakable horror the crime (Harrison, *Agamemnon*).

The "old legend shows through," but with a very different face (Hartigan 3). Laced with "bloodclans," "clanchiefs," " she-child," and "he-women," this text, as well as its original all-male Royal Shakespeare Company production, emphasised the paganistic, un-classical, qualities of the original tragedy. This is in contrast to the almost "archaeological" classical approach to texts like Hamilton and Murray.

Unlike these translations, many of the thirteen plays have significantly adapted the plot and structure of Aeschylus' tragedies. John Lewins' *The House of Atreus* (1966) cuts the *Oresteia* trilogy down to one plays, significantly reducing the choral segments (though maintaining a poetic feel). John Barton and Kenneth Cavander's *The Greek* is composed of ten Greek plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that tell of the Trojan War, Greek victory, and subsequent homecoming of the slaves and victors. In many ways, this play reads as a soap opera, spanning multiple generations. Charles Mee's *Big Love*, based on *Suppliants*, incorporate

many modern references, songs, and dance, appropriating contemporary cultural texts to form its language, while maintaining a semblance to Aeschylus' original plot. Mee's *Agamemnon*, though similarly modern in reference and language use, remains truer in plot structure to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon.* Both are valid negotiations of the source text and the target culture. Similarly, both are as radically different from previous "interpretations" such as O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) and Tadashi Suzuki's *Clytemnestra* (1986). Where O'Neill sets *The Oresteia* in the American Civil War, Suzuki draws strongly upon Noh performance tradition and Japanese culture. With the exception of Lewin, mot of these works are only faintly recognizable as Aeschylus'.

At first, the translations of Aeschylus appear similar, with only small changes due to language development—especially when contrasted to the adaptations. However, this "similarity" is primarily based upon a shared structure and plot. Upon deeper examination, the linguistic differences are far from those due to the natural change in language. They reflect deeper philosophical and cultural negotiations and interpretations of Aeschylus' original tragedies. More obvious, are the differences between the adaptations (and distant relatives) and the translations. Even when these works maintain the original plot, their style and format radically separates them from other works. However, there are trends that can be seen in the rewrites of Aeschylus' plays: (1) there has been a steady rise in the production of these plays; (2) translations are the primary texts for production until the 1980s, adaptations don't become popular options until the 80s;[4] (3) there has been a pendulum swing between translating and producing the "ancientness" and the "modernity" of these works; (4) there has been a similar polarity between interpreting the work as "classical" (elegant and graceful) and "pagan" (bloody

and ritual). Many of these variances are seen in both the published text and their subsequent production interpretations (though, as the texts age, these interpretations change).

The production of Aeschylus' tragedies (composed primarily of *The Oresteia*) follow very similar trends as those of the translations and adaptations. However, there is a strong U.K. influence in both the script choice and production influence—this is especially true of more recent productions. Of the top texts used for production within the U.S., only about half are from U.S. translators, half being from U.K. authors (or associated nations). Similarly, some of the strongest production interpretations (that is, interpretations that have influenced subsequent productions of the same work) have come from U.K. directors and companies. This is not to say that the U.S. does not produce original, creative, and powerful works, but that, as Hartigan states, "It cannot be denied that much of the interest in the massive productions of Greek drama in America reflects the personal interests of key directors of the British theatre, e.g., Peter Hall, Peter Stein, and Tony Harrison" (Hartigan 154). Nowhere is this as true as in the production of the translation/adaptations of Tony Harrison, John Barton & Kenneth Cavander, and Ted Hughes; where interpretation dictates trend.

There have, since 1900-2010, been four major trends in producing these works (trends that follow closely to the translation interpretations). The first, and earliest, is the Classical approach (togas; columns; graceful, flowing, almost feminised movements). This approach is less popular today, but still found in various productions. For the most part, it accompanies the production of translations such as Hamilton and Lattimore. The second, and still prevalent approach is that of cultural transference (relocating the play to another culture). This is seen in the production of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Mee's *Big Love*, and Suzuki's

Clytemnestra. In most productions of this type, the adaptation dictates the cultural transference (and the production follows suit), though this is not always the case.

The third approach to interpreting these plays is that used by the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1980 production of John Barton & Kenneth Cavander's *The Greeks* and The National Theatre of Great Britain's production of Tony Harrison's *Oresteia*. Both of these productions utilised a ritualised paganism (qualities: rough and deliberate language & movements, harsh sounds, masculine atmosphere, blood). This style is in direct conflict with the earlier graceful classicism. Much of the popularity to this approach is due to the filming and distribution of Harrison's translation. It is, possibly, the most recognizable production of Aeschylus' plays.

The final approach, and the most popular for the past decade, is that of contemporary modernisation (often containing political messages relevant to our own age). This style is especially prevalent in the production of Charles Mee's *Agamemnon* and Ted Hughes' *Oresteia*. Where Mee's adaptation continually references modern music and images, Hughes translation makes no such additions. It does, however, reduce the wordy quality of many previous translations and make the text believable in a modern interpretation. Compare Hughes' Strophe 5, *Agamemnon*, with those of the above Murray, Hamilton, & Harrison,

> With these words, Agamemnon surrendered
> To necessity. As if snatched up
> Into the chariot
> Of his own madness (Hughes, *Agamemnon*).

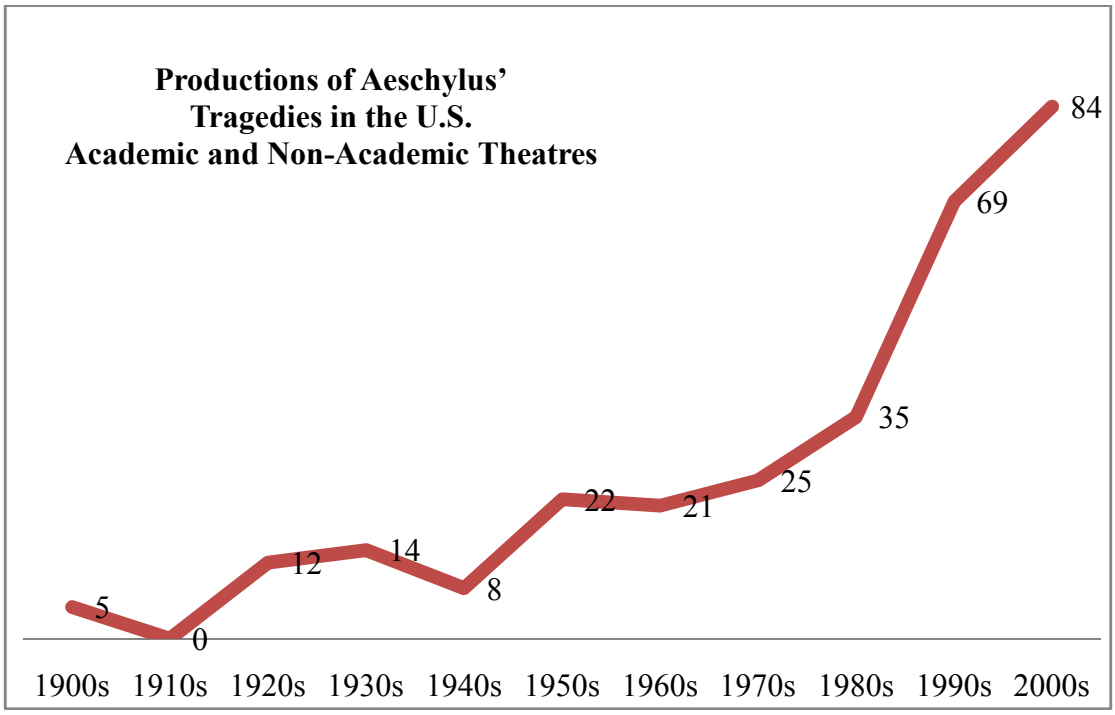
The language is simpler, more fluent, suggestive of our contemporary speech. However, it in no way dictates a modern approach (by which I mean locating the action in the twenty or twenty-

first centuries), though the text is conducive to such an approach. The continual locating of this text in the twenty and twenty-first centuries is primarily due to the influence if its 1999 London National Theatre production (directed by Katie Mitchell). Receiving a lot of published critical attention, including photographs, this production interpretation has been easily accessible to university practitioners and is, therefore, highly influential of current production practices. Similarly, Peter Meineck's modern 1998 *Oresteia*, as filmed by the London Small Theatre Company (Aquila) has equally influenced similar approaches.

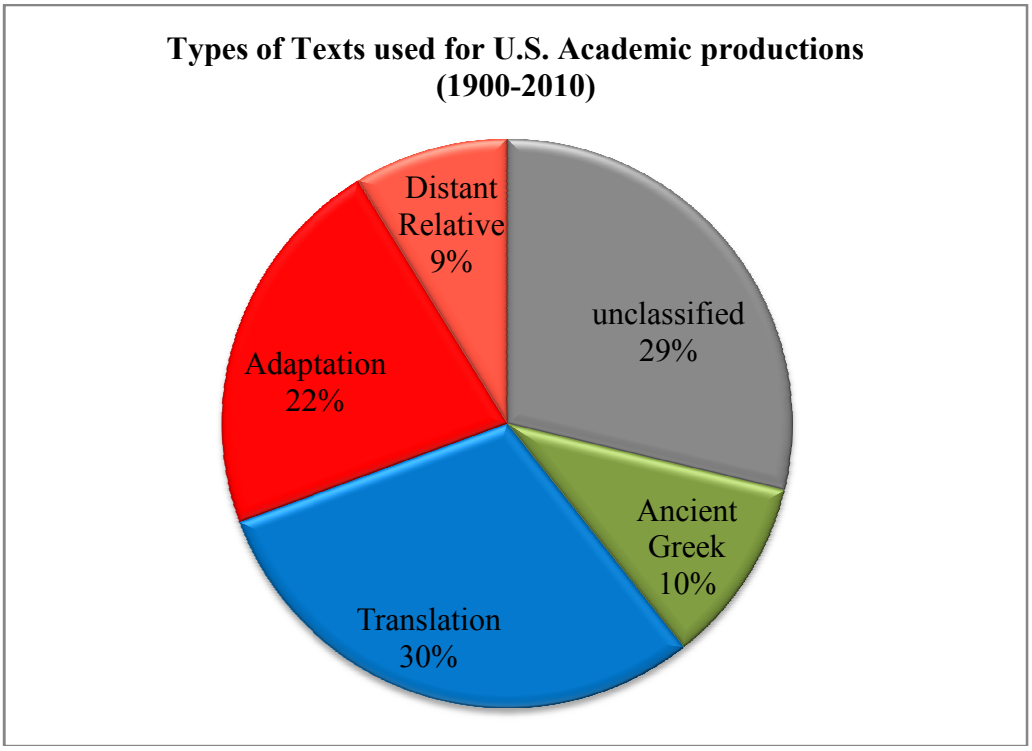
In conclusion, there is a significant difference between translations and adaptations, as demonstrated, and this difference directly effects the production of these plays, as seen at the university level. Though there is no clear relationship between certain texts and specific performance trends, there are as many trends in translating these plays as there are in producing them. Frequently, these trends match; adaptations written to match the spirit of the times coupled with corresponding productions. However, as texts age, but remain in production, we see the performance trends age and alter. This is especially true of John Barton and Kenneth Cavander's *The Greeks*, which was produced almost exclusively with a "ritualised paganism" for the first decade following its publication and debut at by the Royal Shakespeare Company, but transformed into an eclectic modernism (of the Charles Mee style) for its more recent productions. The text has not altered, but the production trends and interpretations have. However, this is very different from asserting that the tragedies of Aeschylus do not change. Since *The Greeks* was published, there have been thirty other translations and adaptations of the *Oresteia*, each as different as their productions, demonstrating the need for further examination of both the translations/adaptations practices of the Ancient Greek playwrights and the production interpretations of their works.

End Notes

1. Graph demonstrating the rising number of production in the U.S. of Aeschylus' tragedies from 1900-2010.



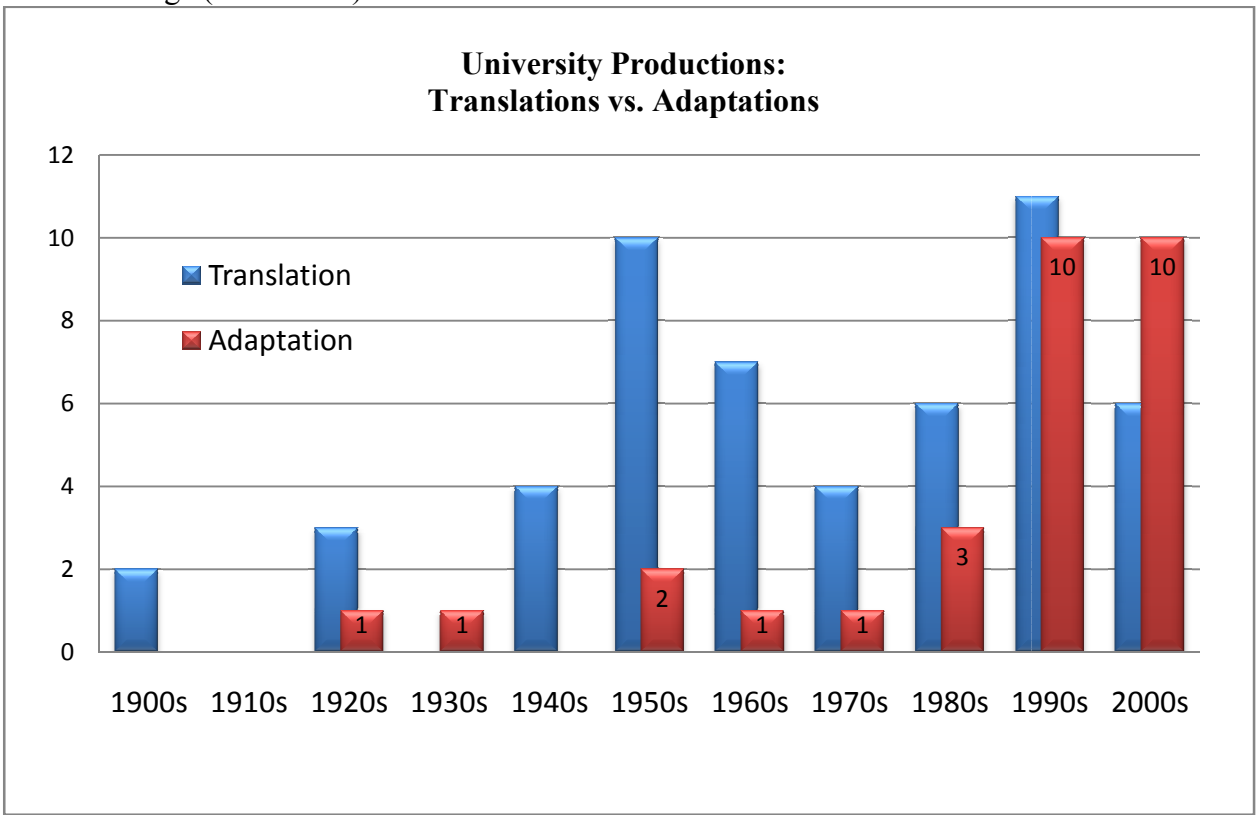
2. Graph demonstrating the types of texts used in the production of Aeschylus' tragedies in the U.S. academic theatre.



3. Table demonstrating the relationship between publication and production dates for the translations/adaptations with more then one performance on the academic stage.

Translation/Adaptation	Publ. Date	Production Dates
John Lewin's *The House of Atreus*	1966	1968, 1989, 1992, 1994, 2001, 2001
Robert Fagles' *The Oresteia*	1975	1966, 1989, 1989, 1994, 1994, ?
Edith Hamilton's *Agamemnon*	1937	1948, 1951, 1956, 1958, 1959
John Barton & Kenneth Cavander's *The Greeks*	1981	1987, 1988, 1999, 2001, 2003
Richmond Lattimore's *The Oresteia*	1953	1960, 1960, 1962, 1974, 2001
William Alfred's *Agamemnon*	1954	1947, 1948, 1953, 1972
Ted Hughes' *The Oresteia*	1999	2001, 2001, 2002, 2004
Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*	1931	1956, 1958, 1959
Tony Harrison's *The Oresteia*	1981	1991, 2001, 2004
Charles Mee's *Big Love*	1994	1999, 2007, 2008
Tadashi Suzuki's *Clytemnestra*	1986	1990, 1993, 1996
Robinson Jeffers' *Tower Beyond Tragedy*	1924	1926, 1932

4. Graph demonstrating the number of translations and adaptations produced on the U.S. academic stage (1900-2010).



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